

Kraków and its heritage in the European context¹

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Kraków is often perceived as 'the heart of Poland' and 'the most Polish of all Polish cities'. Although Poland's boundaries have been shifted to and fro so many times, Kraków has always been Polish. But at the same time it is also the most cosmopolitan place in Poland: not only were numerous foreign influences imported here, but they were also submitted to creative reprocessing. The myth of Poland's ancient capital, a place of symbolic meaning in Polish politics and national life, must be reinterpreted today in the wider context of a uniting Europe. If Central Europe's complex rests in its continual striving to prove its European membership, Kraków has no need of such proofs. It has always made up the Polish chapter of European heritage.

Kraków is one of the so-called 'creative cities', that is cities which have made a creative contribution to the building up of the universal values in our civilisation while at the same time maintaining their local features and pursuing their own, unique, identities. It is also inseparably bound with the specific properties and *genius loci* of Central Europe. Three ideas of Central Europe, the Hanseatic, Jagiellonian, and Habsburg visions, coincided with the peak of Kraków's civilisational prosperity. Two of them came before the end of the Middle Ages. All were to meet at Wawel Hill at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries. Kraków was the only city in which a creative and harmonious blend of all three of these integrative concepts for *Europa Minor* ensued.

If we look at Europe's civilisational development in its two main aspects, cultural and economic, we observe a growing integration of Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary in the 12th and 13th centuries with Carolingian Europe. A factor associated with this process was the economic programme of the Cistercians; but the major determinant was the great sweep eastwards of colonisation, carrying the Western European settlement model into these countries.





Professor Jacek Purchla, 2015. Photo by P. Mazur.

Kraków became a special symbol of the new dimension in urbanisation. The Middle Ages turned it into a European metropolis lodged at the foot of Poland's royal and sacred hill. The factors determining this were not only the city's role as capital, but also its adoption of a new model of settlement. Re-organised in the mid-13th century on German municipal law and designed as an ambitiously expanding colonial town, Kraków was rapidly becoming one of the largest trading emporia in late mediaeval Europe. Its characteristic and distinctly lucid municipal layout, which goes back to that period, was its first creative contribution to European civilisation.

This is the paradox the incursion of Genghis Khan's hordes brought: by destroying, they only managed to reinforce the civilisational strength of Latinate Europe, as borne out by the mediaeval defensive churches of Transylvania, and by Kraków. Though materially devastated, it survived the cataclysm of 1241, demonstrating its power to continue as a *civitas* not in the sense of physical structure, but as something more, an *ethnos*, a combination of functions, a process, or perhaps above all as the idea of a city. The disaster gave the impulse and opportunity for an extraordinary amount of creativity. The initiative came from its prince, Boleslaus V (the Bashful). The groundwork for his capital's new structure was the municipal charter he granted in 1257, opening up a new age in its history. Up to that time, the chief factor determining Kraków's urbanisation was spontaneous growth in its municipal functions and space. The charter endowed it with the framework of a new design. With its distinctive, hitherto unparalleled scale and symmetry, the new urban layout ranked Kraków uniquely in contemporaneous civilisation. Its Market Square, one of the biggest mediaeval market places, is extraordinary for the regularity and scale of its design, well ahead of its time in town planning, blending harmoniously with what had survived the destruction. Freed by its 1257 charter of the narrow streets typical of mediaeval towns, Kraków was invested with a design which is still the basis of its metropolitan development today.

For Kraków, the Magdeburg municipal law on which its charter was based soon turned into a constitutional matrix, the first implementers of which were newcomers from Silesia. Just as elsewhere in Central Europe at the time, the culture of the German speakers played a vital role in the growth of the new Kraków. The influx of German colonists introduced multi-ethnicity as an important ingredient in the life of the nascent metropolis.

In the 15th century, Kraków was one of the biggest towns in Central Europe. Since Vladislaus Jagiełło's victory over the Teutonic Knights at Grunwald in 1410, in 1410 it has been also the capital of a rising European power. Its economic status was growing along with its political power. The vigour of life at Court and the thriving city encouraged the growth of intellectual and artistic



activity. The splendour of the last years of the reign of Casimir the Jagiellonian and the work of Veit Stoss mark the climax of Kraków's age of felicity.

In the 16th century, as capital of a vast dominion, Kraków propagated its influence from the south-western corner of the realm into the vast lands of Lithuania and Ruthenia. The monarch convened Sejm parliamentary sessions to Kraków; while Wawel Castle, headquarters of the dynasty, was one of the most important centres of political power in contemporary Europe. The splendour of the last Jagiellon reigns marked the acme of Kraków's significance on the map of *Europa Minor*. The multi-ethnicity of the metropolis meant that large groups of Jews, Germans, Italians, Ruthenians, Hungarians, and Scots lived in the environs of Wawel Castle. At the same time, Kraków was truly the focal point for Polish culture. Sigismundian Kraków not only imported a variety of foreign influences; it also creatively transformed them, assuming the role of a prolific centre with an impact well beyond the borders of the Jagiellonian domain.

In the mid-16th century, the Kraków agglomeration counted some 30,000 inhabitants, like Prague, the other major city in Central Europe. Though these two cities could not vie with Rome, Venice, Naples, Constantinople, Lisbon, Paris, London, or Antwerp in magnitude or economic status, they were well ahead of the other cities in Central Europe, such as Gdańsk, Königsberg, Wilno, Riga, Kiev, Lwów, or Wrocław, in the complexity and power of their functions.

Triumph would soon turn into the cause of downfall. The concept of union with Lithuania devised in Kraków in the late 14th century eventually created a threat to Kraków's status as capital. This was connected with the constitutional evolution that ensued in the 15th and 16th centuries. The commonwealth of the nobility into which Poland was transformed during the 15th century based its political existence on a parliamentary system for the *szlachta* (Polish nobility and gentry). With a peripheral situation in a state bulging out north-eastwards, for practical reasons Kraków could no longer be the venue for parliamentary conventions. If we consider the headquarters of the supreme authorities the capital of any state, then Kraków was gradually losing this position in the 16th century. However, for a long time, Kraków retained its status as capital, as understood in an age of feudalism. Here the insignia of statehood – the royal treasury and archives – were lodged. Well-nigh until the demise of Poland-Lithuania all the main state occasions, coronations and royal weddings were held here.

Already by the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries Kraków's legend had proved the critical factor decisive of its future. The city of Kraków provided the natural setting for the last great



attempt to salvage Poland's sovereignty. On 24 March 1794, the Kościuszko Insurrection broke out. Kraków's capital status unexpectedly assumed a new dimension at the Congress of Vienna. In 1815, the city became the object of keen rivalry between the three Partitioning Powers, since it was still perceived as a symbol of Poland's sovereignty. In the outcome of the compromise arrived at between Austria, Prussia, and Russia, in 1815–1846 Kraków was formally an independent state, a Republic (*der Freistaat Krakau*) under the 'guardianship' of the three Powers.

The 19th century brought changes in the settlement network of Europe. A combination of political and economic causes made Kraków remain a non-industrial city with a fairly slow rate of growth until the end of the century. Locked inside the Austrian defences, it was relatively small and poor. But a way was found to give the city a chance of development thanks to the liberalism that came to Austria in 1860, and the power of the old metropolitan tradition. This was the essence of the Kraków phenomenon of that period: there was no simple relationship between the city's size and its metropolitan function. The power of tradition was an extremely important factor in its progress. Thanks to the power of its past Kraków became the place integrating all the Polish people; Kraków, not the province's capital, Lwów, became the heart of Polish national life.

Kraków's development at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was based on numerous contradictions. The systemic deficiency in the city's economy was compensated for by its extraordinary significance to the people of Poland. Its function as the nation's spiritual capital contrasted blatantly with its function as a frontier fortress and provincial garrison manned by a foreign army. From the vantage-point of the great cosmopolitan metropolis into which Vienna had turned as the centuries changed, Kraków was but a middle-sized peripheral town. From the point of view of Polish *raison d'être*, it was fulfilling the functions of the capital, albeit an impoverished capital, of a non-existent Polish state. These and other antinomies made up the Kraków phenomenon and accounted for the exceptionality of its situation under Austrian rule. The contemporary Kraków was not merely the Polish Athens, but also the Polish Piedmont. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Lwów performed the functions of provincial capital of Galicia, the largest province in Austria, while Kraków was the lynch-pin integrating Polish national affairs, especially after the 1905 Revolution was crushed in the Congress Kingdom (Russian partitional zone). On the eve of the First World War, it was in Kraków that the activities of the major independence groups were concentrated. Kraków was HQ for Józef Piłsudski, who in August 1914 led his Polish Legions out from this city to fight for independence – against Russia, but still as a partner of Austria.



With a population of around 750,000, Kraków is much bigger than the planners of fifty years ago expected and, more importantly, now going through a period of demographic stability. This certainly does not mean a stop to development, but rather a slowing down of the expansion which was responsible for a fall in the standard of living.

By virtue of its hallmark and the attractiveness of its heritage, Kraków has the potential for the metropolitan game. Its heritage is what makes Kraków Poland's second city and not just one of sixteen provincial capitals. Kraków's heritage is the natural asset with which it has entered the 21st century. It is its first metropolitan function, still determining its position in Europe today. The potency of heritage in Kraków's metropolitan personality has been defined by its investiture in the 19th and 20th centuries as the archetype of the nation's spiritual capital, an archetype supporting Kraków's essential role as the factor integrating the people of Poland, yet at the same time determining the city's high level of recognisability in Europe and throughout the world. There is also a material aspect of cultural heritage: a superbly preserved historic urbanistic fabric and first-rate monuments. The fact that Kraków was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List already in 1978 is a cogent testimonial to the supra-regional value of its heritage resources. Kraków, the only large historic city within Poland's current borders to have survived the tragedy of the Second World War physically unscathed, is a symbol of continuity and endurance. Its second metropolitan function, strictly bound up with the first, is its intellectual and artistic potential. One of the signs of its capacity for the creation of culture is that it is often referred to as Poland's cultural capital. And this is another reason why Kraków has become an international tourist centre.

Kraków is one of those of our Continent's old cities whose contemporary development is determined by their past and tradition. It is the only city of such a large size between Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Bratislava, Vienna, and Budapest which has had its historically shaped metropolitan functions degraded to the rank of a provincial centre.

Today, Kraków's cultural heritage has to be deciphered not only in its national framework but also in the international dimension. It is no coincidence that international tourism has become the chief factor determining the economic development of Kraków and Lesser Poland, especially since Poland's accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004. Today Kraków is 'trendy'. The work which contributed to the changeover involved not only operations to stop the prospect of ecological disaster, but also the swift removal of the consequences, by the conservation of heritage.

Kraków is currently one of the busiest tourist markets on the continent. Over ten million tourists visit it every year. In the plebiscite held by the monthly magazine *Travel & Leisure* in July



2015, it was ranked third in the top ten of Europe's most attractive cities. Only Florence and Rome came ahead of it. The sites entered on the UNESCO World Heritage List in the vicinity of Kraków, especially the Wieliczka Salt Mine and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, are popular destinations for tourists.

One of the paramount factors accounting for the growth of the tourist industry is that Lesser Poland is the birthplace of John Paul II. The Sanctuary of Divine Mercy at Łagiewniki, which the Pope from Poland consecrated on 17 August 2002 during his last pilgrimage to Poland, receives pilgrims from scores of countries all over the world. Research shows that 25% of all the pilgrims are from abroad, chiefly from Europe, but also from the Philippines, Costa Rica, Cuba, Japan, South Korea, the USA, and they also include Ukrainians and Russians... A monumental religious venue, the John Paul II Centre, has been raised in the neighbourhood of the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy, on the site of Kraków's old Solvay soda works, where during the Second World War Karol Wojtyła worked as a blue-collar labourer. The St. John Paul II Sanctuary is at the Centre's very heart. The relics of the Polish Pope were brought here in 2011 and since that time his cult has flourished.

There is no other city in Poland which has accumulated so much myth and legend and preserved its symbolic layer as full of life as the space of Kraków's mediaeval City Centre, teeming with life today. As in past centuries, the medieval melody of the bugle call sounding from St Mary's Tower determines the rhythm of life, and the Royal Sigismund Bell tolls from Wawel Hill to comment on the important moments in the life of the nation and the city. The city continues to order its life by the traditional calendar of religious holy days such as the feast day of St. Stanislaus, patron of Kraków, and Corpus Christi, and the folkloric amusements such as the Rękawka fair, the Lajkonik Hobby-Horse parade, or the Wianki midsummer night's eve festival. The multilayer memory and identity of the city are superbly complemented by the suburban folklore which has been forming since the 19th century in Zwierzyniec, Krowodrza, and Ludwinów. The folklore is still thriving, symbolised by the Lajkonik and the Nativity scene (*szopka*) traditions, particularly distinctive for Półwsie Zwierzynieckie and Krowodrza. The Nativity scene (*szopka*) is a traditional craft which is passed down from generation to generation, ensuring its continuity. The Lajkonik parade is a colourful pageant through the city of Kraków. The main character is a rider dressed as a Tatar mounted on a hobby-horse. The event commemorates the Mongol invasions which threatened the city in the 13th century. The Lajkonik parade and the Nativity scene (*szopka*) competition show how robust the local tradition is, and that is precisely why they have been entered on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.





Cross-cultural encounter. The Nativity Scene (szopka) Tradition in Kraków explained to Hungarian ICH expert, Dr Eszter Csonka-Takács, October 2016. Photo by Paweł Kobek, © National Heritage Board of Poland.

Is a city which has committed itself to such an extent to the reverence of its past still capable of facing the challenges of the present day? There can be no doubt that Kraków is an arena for a fierce confrontation between contemporary civilisation and the heritage of the past. Heritage means memory, choice, and identity. That is why Kraków is today creating a new chapter of Polish heritage for Europe and the world. After the death of John Paul II in 2005 Kraków quite naturally became the guardian of his memory and his legacy.

At the same time, the city is endeavouring to revive its multi-ethnic tradition, lost as a result of the Holocaust. This is expressed both by the Jewish Cultural Festival, which every June since 1988 has summoned a large audience from all over the world; as well as in the phenomenon of Kraków's Kazimierz quarter. Before our very eyes, Kazimierz has become a laboratory for the retrieval of the memory of a world that has gone forever but nevertheless is still an inherent part of the identity of the European Core. Finally, there is the most astonishing experience: the reinterpretation of the heritage of Nowa Huta. Today the Polish Magnitogorsk is not just a symbol of the Sovietisation of Poland, but also the fourth phase of the grand urban development of Kraków, a development reaching far beyond the local bounds. At the same time, it is also the legend of a battle for dignity, the legend of Solidarity.

Diversity, integration, continuity, authenticity, representativity, artistic class in architectural heritage – all of these determine not only the meaning of Kraków's heritage, but also the strategy for its protection, and especially the comprehensiveness of that strategy. The foundation of this endeavour is the continual reinterpretation of heritage.

Thus history has become a factor in the city's development which in turn has created a variety of options for the interpretation of cultural heritage, for meanings of the city – as a process, a function, an idea, form, and mirror of civilisation. The complex story of Kraków, in the 20th century as well, confirms the words of Sophie Lang that cities are never a random occurrence, that they are a concept of a higher order. In Central Europe, cultural identity has never been a feature that has been fixed for all time. It has always called for continual choice. In this sense, too, Kraków is the very essence of the European core, understood also as trauma and ambivalence. The comprehension of the Kraków phenomenon, and a broader historical outlook on the changeability of the functions it has played in the settlement network for this part of Europe and of its changing meanings and subject-matters, holds the key to understanding the nature of *Europa Minor*.

Europa Minor has never been out of the European civilisation. But it has preserved a distinctiveness which today is a value.

